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Web site unifies variety of info

The project benefited from an outsider's perspective.

By DEBORA SHAULIS

VINDICATOR STAFF WRITER

YOUNGSTOWN — Mahoning County has found something new to consolidate — its Web sites.

It took about 90 days and 400 working hours to create the county's one-stop Web portal, The Mahoning County Communicator, says Jacob A. Williams, director of information technology.

Residents can go to the Communicator, at www.mahoningcountyoh.gov, to read agendas of commissioners' meetings, look for job postings, get tax information on properties and more.

Visitors can refer to the site for information on local history, business development, schools and universities, attractions, events, dining and hotels.

The county's Internet presence has changed a great deal in a short period of time, Williams said.

Certain departments, such as the auditor, sheriff and Board of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, had established their own Web sites with unique domain names, while many other departments had no Web sites, Williams said. Some Web sites were hosted by the county; others had different vendors.

Outdated information

A common complaint from the public was that information on older Web sites was stale. The process of updating was slow if a department was using a vendor to host its site, because the vendor had to make the changes, Williams said. Also, the information technology staff often had to investigate requests to make sure the proper information was being communicated to vendors.

The county now uses a content management system by Microsoft that allows changes to be made locally, and without the need for special Web programming software. That removes some burden from the IT staff and saves money, Williams said.

The process of creating a county Web site began last July, when the Automatic Data Processing Board approved Web hosting services through Cboss Community Network. The data processing board approves all data processing equipment purchases and contracts for county offices.

Actual work began last September, when questionnaires were sent to county departments and offices. With encouragement from all three commissioners and Auditor Michael V. Sciortino, most departments met their deadlines, Williams said. The site went online in December.

Fresh perspective

The Communicator benefited from an outsider's perspective. Pam Myers, a trainer in the IT department who worked with Williams on the portal, is originally from Cleveland. Williams told her to ask questions of departments based on what she needed to know as a newcomer, from the founding of Mahoning County to the functions of various departments.

"It worked out well. She was a valuable asset to getting this project done," Williams said.

The next phase of the project is to integrate departments' own Web sites into the Communicator. The sanitary engineering department's Web site is good but complicated because of the type and volume of information on it. It will take at least a month to merge the two, Williams said. The dog warden's site isn't complicated and can be integrated in a few hours, he added.

Savings

The county will realize greater cost savings once all county Web sites are integrated, Williams said. Hosting fees don't cost much — \$50 to \$100 a month, he estimated, but Web site upgrades are expensive. "One hundred dollars an hour is actually cheap to pay a programmer," he said.

A long-term project will be to digitize building permit forms so property owners can complete them online. Williams realized the value of such a service when he added a deck onto his home last year. "I had to go to six different offices. It's a painstaking process," he said.

Communicator users also can e-mail questions to the IT staff. The most popular query so far has been how people obtain marriage licenses. Williams didn't know, either, until he worked on this project. Now he has the answer: It's a function of probate court.

shaulis@vindy.com